



Bebe Moore Campbell

Biography

Bebe Moore Campbell was born in Philadelphia, the only child of Doris and George Moore. As a child of divorced parents, Campbell spent the school year in Philadelphia with her mother and the summer with her father in North Carolina. Her second book, entitled *Sweet Summer: Growing Up With and Without My Dad* (1989), describes a father-daughter relationship as it flourished during the summer months when Campbell lived with her father and grandmother. The book is a loving tribute to the warmth of extended family and friends, but especially captures the special bond between the author and George Moore, her father. She admires the heroic way he persevered after a car accident left him a paraplegic when she was just 10 months old. She captures both the spirit of her father and the longing she felt for him during the school year in much of her writing.

As a child growing up in both the North and South, Campbell had the opportunity to witness firsthand the effects of racial segregation in both regions. In the South, she noticed signs posting restricted access to African Americans to public facilities. In the North, racism was less blatant, but just as pervasive. She noticed, for example, that there were no black teenagers on “American Bandstand,” a show that was taped in her hometown of Philadelphia.

Quick Facts

- * 1950-2006
- * African-American novelist
- * Her novels center on interpersonal relationships

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As she grew up, she became increasingly aware of the inequalities between blacks and whites. By far the most painful discovery for Campbell came in 1955 when she learned that two white men had murdered a young black teenager, Emmett Till, who was visiting the South for the summer. Supposedly this young man had made sexual advances on a white woman, a behavior considered taboo in the South. These men were acquitted, even though one of them bragged that he had committed the crime. The murder of Emmett Till provides the basis for Campbell's first novel, *Your Blues Ain't Like Mine* (1992). In an interview with Jane Campbell, the author relates: "I was five when he died. He was a topic, and still is in my community. He was a reference point. So, I always thought of him -- the outrageous injustice of the way he died -- as sort of symbolic of the oppression of African-Americans in this country" (*Callaloo* 955).

The women in Campbell's life also profoundly affected her development and her writing. Living with her mother and maternal grandmother, affectionately called NaNa, Campbell was expected to speak well, excel in school, and carry herself with poise and dignity. Her mother, Doris, holds two masters degrees, one in sociology and the other in social work. She moved her family to a multi-ethnic neighborhood in Philadelphia called West Oak Lane. Campbell's experience with difficult race relations is reflected in the insightful way she depicts them in both *Your Blues Ain't Like Mine* and *Brothers and Sisters* (1994), one of the few books written by an African-American that tackles the issues that arise in a growing friendship between a black and a white woman. Campbell's paternal grandmother also influenced her perception of race relations in the South, which she covers in *Sweet Summer*.

After graduating from the Philadelphia High School for Girls in 1968, Campbell enrolled at the University of Pittsburgh. She received a bachelor's degree in elementary education in 1972 and taught for five years. When this career became unfulfilling, she enrolled in a writing class taught by renowned author Toni Cade Bambara. Eventually, Campbell left teaching and pursued a career in writing, submitting articles and stories to periodicals such as *Essence*, *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *Ebony*, *Seventeen* and *Black Enterprise*. Campbell also does commentaries on Morning Edition for National Public Radio.



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In 1977, Campbell lost her beloved father, George Moore, to another car accident while she was living in Washington D.C. with her then-husband and young daughter, Maia. The author now lives in Los Angeles with her daughter, who is now an actress, her second husband, Ellis Gordon, Jr., a banker and their son, Ellis Gordon III. Her numerous awards include a National Association of Negro Business and Professional Women's Literature Award (1978), the 1994 NAACP Image Award for literature, a National Endowment for the Arts Literature Grant (1980), and the University of Pittsburgh's Distinguished Alumni Award.

Although two of Bebe Moore-Campbell's novels are based on historical events, she does not consider herself an historical novelist. The heart of her work focuses on interpersonal relationships. She explores the complexities that often exist between males and females, blacks and whites, parents and children, and people and their communities. Echoes of Campbell's personal history infuse each work. The presence/absence of strong fathers in the development of children, the delicate balance of race relations in the workplace and the love, strength, and tension within the black community recur thematically in her work.

In *Successful Women, Angry Men: Backlash in the Two-Career Marriage* (1986), Campbell's first book, Campbell explores the difficulties that couples experience as women build their careers. The book draws on the author's experiences, as well as those of more than 100 couples who were interviewed for the work. Her second book, *Sweet Summer: Growing Up With and Without My Dad*, is a sensitive, sweet memoir about the author's experiences growing up as a child of divorce. The non-fiction work lovingly captures young Campbell's anticipation spending the summer with her father, whom she deeply cherished and admired. What also comes through is a celebration of his strength, courage, and independence as a disabled parent. The book also celebrates the importance of extended family, and remembers with love the strong women who helped to mold her character. Hailed for its positive portrayal of an African-American father-daughter relationship, *Sweet Summer* demonstrates the lasting impact of a strong male figure in the life of a child.

Campbell's most critically acclaimed work, her first novel, *Your Blues Ain't Like Mine*, which the *New York Times* hailed as one of the most notable books of 1992, centers around the murder of a fifteen-year-old named Armstrong Todd. The novel follows the families of the victim, the murderers, and several minor characters for thirty years from 1955 to 1985, exploring how deeply their lives were affected by the tragedy and scourge of racism in the South. Campbell demonstrates that although Armstrong is a victim of the tragedy, other lives suffer because of racism and dysfunctional relationships.



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While historical facts provide the basis for this novel, they serve mostly as the backdrop for a story that locates family dysfunction, poverty, and ignorance at the root of the larger racial problem. In the novel, Delotha and Wydell Todd, Armstrong's parents, grapple with intense grief and guilt: Wydell for failing to be a positive presence in his son's life; Delotha for sending Armstrong into what she knew was a racially charged atmosphere. Floyd Cox, the poor laborer who commits the crime, and his wife, Lily, spend years trying to overcome abject poverty, class discrimination, oppressive family structure, alcoholism, and the stigma that results from the murder. Beautifully lyrical and deeply engrossing, *Blues* shifts in perspective through a third-person-limited narration, drawing well-rounded, sympathetic characters on both sides of the racial divide.

Like *Your Blues Ain't Like Mine*, *Brothers and Sisters* (1994) finds its roots in historical events, this time the brutal beating of Rodney King and subsequent riots in Los Angeles after the policemen's acquittal in 1992. In the novel, the protagonist, Esther Jackson, an African-American, is a midlevel manager at a bank in downtown L.A. She grapples with her feelings toward and responsibility to her community in the wake of the riots. At the heart of this novel is the growing friendship between Esther and a white co-worker, Mallory.

The novel explores the difficulties of interracial friendship from both perspectives as they struggle to understand each other and penetrate their individual defenses. The strength of their friendship is tested when Mallory accuses a recently hired black manager of sexual harassment, arousing prejudices and conflicts within each character. Campbell allows the reader to see sexual harassment, affirmative action, and class warfare from each character's perspective. *Brothers and Sisters* presents avenues of healing; for as Esther learns through Mallory to relinquish some of her anger and bitterness towards upper-class white privileged members of society, Esther uncovers hidden areas of racist attitude of which Mallory is unaware. Quick-paced, energetic and engaging, *Brothers and Sisters* reached the *New York Times* Bestseller list just two weeks after its release. As in *Blues*, Campbell demonstrates an uncanny ability to write from many different perspectives, black and white, male and female.



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In Campbell's novel *Singing in the Comeback Choir* (1998), she focuses more on problems and healing within the black community as Maxine McCoy, the novel's protagonist, returns to her childhood community in North Philadelphia to care for her aging grandmother. Echoes of Campbell's own girlhood, growing up in Philadelphia with her maternal grandmother find their way into this novel. Maxine, a successful television producer returns from Hollywood to find that what was once a working-class neighborhood is practically a slum. Her grandmother, who had been a popular singer years before, suffers the effects of a stroke, poor diet and cigarette smoke. This sensitive and poignant novel goes beyond an exploration of the problems facing many urban black communities to an understanding of the need for responsibility and accountability. Campbell's energetic, lyrical style captures a young woman's love and admiration for her grandmother, as well as her need to reconnect with her roots.

Campbell also explores the need for personal healing in *Singing in the Comeback Choir*. Although Maxine enjoys a loving relationship with her husband, Satchel, a lawyer, his extramarital affair a year earlier nearly destroys the marriage. Because of this, Maxine struggles to rebuild trust in her husband as they prepare to welcome a child. The relationship between Maxine and her grandmother, Lindy, also encounters challenges as Maxine must find a way to help Lindy without fracturing her sense of independence and dignity. With remarkable insight and sensitivity, Campbell delves into bittersweet nuances of personal relationships, especially within the family.

Campbell's final novel was *What You Owe Me* (2001), which was also a bestseller. It tells the story of a long friendship, including a devastating betrayal, between an African-American woman and a Holocaust survivor who meet while working as maids shortly after WWII. Campbell has also recently authored a children's book, titled *Sometimes My Mommy Gets Angry*, narrated by a little girl named Annie whose mother suffers from bi-polar disorder. The book won the National Alliance for the Mentally Ill (NAMI) Outstanding Literature Award for 2003.

Elizabeth Bebe Moore Campbell died at her home in Los Angeles, on Monday, November 27, 2006, of complications related to brain cancer.



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